Beyond Rigor and Relevance: Producing Consumable Research about Information Systems

DANIEL ROBEY
Georgia State University

M. LYNNE MARKUS
Claremont Graduate University

Since the origins of the academic field of information systems (IS) in the 1970s, researchers have faced apparently contradictory pressures to produce research that is both academically rigorous and relevant to practice. On the one hand, we are exhorted to generate scholarly articles that are academically rigorous; on the other, we are urged to make our research more relevant to practice. In this paper, we argue that there is no inherent conflict between these two pressures; it is not only possible, but also desirable, for IS research to fulfill both directives. We present four major strategies for conducting research that is both rigorous and relevant: cultivating practitioner sponsorship, adopting new research models, producing consumable research reports, and supporting nontraditional research outlets.
our educational and research activities.

Caught in the horns of this dilemma, IS researchers have self-consciously wondered how their efforts could be both rigorous and relevant. Realistically, how could this be done? Would not a bow to relevance be tantamount to disciplinary suicide? Couldn’t we just ignore the practitioners and hope they go away? In one form or another, questions like these confront IS researchers on a regular basis.

In this paper we offer guidance to researchers wishing to produce research that is useful for practicing managers without sacrificing the rigor demanded by the academic community. We argue that IS research can be made consumable by practitioners if we adjust the way we undertake, present, disseminate and evaluate IS research. We argue that consumable IS research can and should be both rigorous and relevant. Indeed, research would cease to be relevant if it were not rigorous in conception and execution. However, rigorous research that is prepared for practical consumption differs markedly from the articles that have traditionally graced our field’s premier research journals.

The Relevance Crisis in IS Research

Academic researchers are motivated by incentives to produce “high science” theory and empirical research for respected academic journals. Academics are evaluated according to the standards of the academy, which, stated bluntly, means that junior faculty in research schools will lose their jobs unless they publish in the premier peer-refereed journals in their fields. When IS researchers faced a shortage of journals that would publish their research, we began founding our own. Our first — MIS Quarterly — began its existence in 1977, positioned as a journal that could serve both academic and practitioner audiences. Since then, many new journals have been recognized as desirable outlets for academic IS research, but few have adopted MISQ’s dual-audience strategy. Information Systems Research began publication in 1990 with a clear mission to serve academic readers, and it maintains a highly legitimate affiliation with INFORMS. Sadly, the dual-audience strategy has declined even at MISQ; non-academic subscribers have dropped from over 2,000 to less than 800.

By focusing their work on outlets targeted to other academics, academic writers have effectively abandoned the practitioner audience. A casual perusal of any issue of any leading journal reveals the source of the problem: arcane explanations, advanced statistical analyses, extensive mathematical notation, excessive references to other published work, and a shortage of practical advice. From a practitioner’s perspective, academic writings are literally unreadable.

To make matters worse, the domain of IS practice is changing at an accelerating rate, spurred on by rapid technological developments. This makes the establishment of a traditional “program of research” about any particular technology a questionable enterprise. For example, although the IS field has amassed an impressive body of knowledge about group support technologies over the span of ten years, one wonders whether this body of knowledge can be applied to the technologies that are emerging now. Moreover, few practitioners can sustain their interest in a given topic long enough to accommodate the academic calendar and the customary delays in the publishing cycle. Managers need to know most about a technology when it is new, yet the academic world produces results only after practical interest has cooled. Viewed from this perspective, the presumed benefits of the revered “cumulative tradition” in IS research are potentially valueless to the practitioner. No matter how thorough and conclusive the research findings, they may have little relevance once the technology studied has disappeared from practice. Because IS researchers often define their interests around particular information technologies, we may ironically be ensuring irrelevance by targeting our work at traditional academic publication outlets.

Meanwhile, consultants and the practitioner media (e.g., Computerworld and CIO Magazine) have stepped in with timely reports on the practical implications of numerous emerging technologies. Virtually every topic of recent importance in IS — reengineering, mass customization, intranets/ extranets, enterprise models and software packages, electronic commerce, and virtual organizations — has been tackled by consultants, vendors, and journalists before the academics even got started. They, not we, are shaping the way that practitioners think about these important new technologies and applications. Writing by consultants is both innovative and practical, and the market for their writing and advisory services has grown enormously. Academics who are not consultants are characteristically skeptical of the superficiality of consulting work, but it is obvious that academics have a hard time competing for practitioners’ attention.

Ironically, we disparage articles in Harvard Business Review, Sloan Management Review, CIO Magazine, and Computerworld when they appear in tenure and promotion dossiers, yet we value these sources as teaching materials more than we value our own papers in leading academic journals. We are exposing our students to the more appealing writing of the consultants who author these articles, while our own research is directed toward our fellow researchers. In the eyes of those denizens of the “real world,” practitioners and our students, academia hypocritically pursues “rigorous research” that is curiously unknown in corporate boardrooms and in university classrooms. Our credibility is damaged because we fail to practice what we preach. Unlike Microsoft Corporation, whose associates delight in using the software products they build, academics do not “eat our own dog food.” Rather, we consistently send signals that our research is irrelevant to practice by keeping it away from the professional students we serve.
Related Content

A Systematic Mapping Study on Requirements Engineering in Software Ecosystems
[www.igi-global.com/article/a-systematic-mapping-study-on-requirements-engineering-in-software-ecosystems/196206?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/a-systematic-mapping-study-on-requirements-engineering-in-software-ecosystems/196206?camid=4v1a)

Developing a Homegrown Course Management System - Community/course, Action/interaction Management System (CAMS)
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/developing-homegrown-course-management-system/44582?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/developing-homegrown-course-management-system/44582?camid=4v1a)

Systems Design Issues in Planning and Implementation
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/systems-design-issues-planning-implementation/44529?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/systems-design-issues-planning-implementation/44529?camid=4v1a)

The Other Side of “Big Brother”: CCTV Surveillance and Intelligence Gathering by Private Police
David Aspland (2011). *Teaching Cases Collection* (pp. 34-48).
[www.igi-global.com/article/other-side-big-brother/54465?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/other-side-big-brother/54465?camid=4v1a)